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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR AF/E (SCHOFIELD, GAREY), AF/PD
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: VOA ON THE HOT SEAT

REF: ADDIS ABABA 3852

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¶1. (U) SUMMARY: A November 15 meeting with State Minister of Foreign Affairs Tekeda Alemu provided the opportunity for the Charge to discuss the Government of Ethiopia's concerns regarding reporting by the VOA's Amharic Service, as well as larger issues of GOE press outreach and its relationship with the private media (other topics discussed reported SEPTEL). The State Minister's views on both issues do not indicate that quick fixes are likely on either. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) During a meeting called by State Minister Tekeda, the Charge raised GOE concerns about VOA Amharic service reporting; the State Minister had sent two letters on the subject within the past two weeks (the first reported REFTEL). The Charge said that the Embassy takes charges of biased reporting by the VOA seriously; she added that she also remains concerned that perceptions of bias may have spilled over into outright harassment of local VOA stringers, noting the October 26 attack on one.

¶3. (SBU) The State Minister responded that he knows that freedom of speech and of the press make GOE complaints on the subject "a delicate matter," and that he hoped his letters did not convey a message not intended, namely that the USG should in some way control or manage VOA reporting. Instead, he said, they were intended to alert the Charge that the VOA is "not working as a news outfit," but was instead "carrying out political activities intended to damage the EPRDF and the Ethiopian people with no sense of embarrassment or proportion." He characterized VOA Amharic reporting as deeply imbalanced, saying that it intentionally sought out interlocutors who would comment negatively on the GOE; as an example, Tekeda cited recent stories that included accounts by weeping family members of those killed and detained in recent unrest. He said that only an Amharic speaker could understand how deeply embedded the VOA's partisanship was in the Amharic language.

¶4. (SBU) The Charge answered that she looked on his letters as a call for action; she said that she had already sent a request (REFTEL) seeking an impartial review of VOA Amharic reporting. She added that the Embassy had already reviewed in detail the instance of perceived bias included in the State Minister's first letter, and noted that the English translation provided by the Ministry did not fully reflect the Amharic used in the broadcast, which did (unlike the Ministry translation) source a call for security forces to disobey orders to an opposition leader interviewed, and so was not a direct call from the VOA for such action.

¶5. (SBU) The Charge said that the increasing controversy over VOA Amharic reporting had indicated to her two problems, one the GOE's and one the USG's. The GOE's problem, she said, was that internal efforts to control the flow of information paradoxically magnify the importance of VOA Amharic reporting; the lack of non-state media, especially electronic media, guarantee the VOA an audience. That so much VOA reporting focuses on opposition activities is a result not only of VOA having good sources among opposition leaders, but also GOE inaccessibility. The GOE, she said, does not do well in getting its side of the story out, making the appearance of one-sided reporting to some extent inevitable. Perhaps, she posited, the GOE needs a spokesperson who could persuasively and proactively present its policy and actions.

¶6. (SBU) The USG problem, the Charge said, is that there may in fact be a balance issue, but that, if so, much of it comes from lack of access and the resulting inability to report the GOE side. She urged the State Minister to "really think about how you get your message out."

¶7. (SBU) The Minister said he did not "disagree that the Government and the ruling party do not do well," but attributed it, not to an apparent inability to present its case, but to letting private papers "have their way for 14 years," and not more actively moving forward on longstanding

plans for a state-run press council and journalistic code of conduct. As a result, he said, "they have been free to wreak havoc." In regard to the VOA, he lamented that the Amharic service "could have played an important role" in inspiring Ethiopians, but was instead "part of the very ugly scene in Addis Ababa."

18. (SBU) The State Minister lamented that "a few people" in the Diaspora have been playing a "zealous," negative role "with no inhibition." He said that this was not isolated to the U.S., and cited examples in South Africa of opposition supporters there intimidating pro-government Ethiopians and Ethiopian-owned businesses. Speaking of oppositionist members of the U.S. Diaspora, he said, "they provoked us," adding that their support empowered the hardest-line elements among the opposition and that "the Hailu [Shawel] types are beyond the pale." He praised USG statements on Ethiopia, but said he felt recent ones "have been watered down a little," and added that he hoped that, despite pressure from within the U.S., they would not become less balanced.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The question of VOA Amharic reporting, along with the flow of information to and within Ethiopia more generally, is clearly much on the minds of those in official circles here. The GOE remains focused on issues of control and restraint, however, rather than positive engagement and outreach. END COMMENT.

HUDDLESTON